Books Forum

This issue's Books forum will consider Francis Fukuyama's *Our posthuman future: Consequences of the biotechnology revolution* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002). In this book Fukuyama envisions one kind of 'biosociety' in which genetic manipulation will alter human nature 'itself', and that corresponding alterations in social notions of humanity will make the political maintenance of a democratic social order increasingly problematic. Fukuyama's delivery is provocative, drawing from the imagery of Aldous Huxley's *Brave new world* to incite the reader's imagination, and he concludes by arguing that the state must regulate biotechnology. The book's treatment of the policy implications of biotechnology is not just an academic exercise; Fukuyama himself serves on George W. Bush's Council on Bioethics, which advises the president's office on policy issues pertaining to the development and applications of biotechnology.

Since its publication, *Our posthuman future* has enjoyed a wide readership, and has been a touchstone for public discussions about biotechnology. Major newspapers have been quick to pick up on its more sensationalist themes, including headlines like 'Does the human race have a future?' (*The Irish Times*, 25 May 2002); 'The nature of beings to come' (*The Australian*, 15 May 2002); and, more recently, 'The most dangerous idea on earth? The bioethics of transhumanism' (*The London Financial Times*, 28 May 2005). As our reviewers point out, such language—while it serves to attract attention to important issues—can also compromise public discourse, as social and technical complexity is obscured behind sloganism and sound-bites.

In this Books forum, three distinguished reviewers share their provocative thoughts on *Our posthuman future* from distinct disciplinary perspectives. Sheila Jasanoff, drawing from science studies, cites contemporary anthropological research in the biosciences, drawing attention to various cultural contingencies that challenge Fukuyama's deterministic (and often dystopic) outlook. David Resnik, drawing from bioethics, critiques Fukuyama's reliance on the distinction between 'therapy' and 'enhancement', arguing that these concepts cannot be considered independent of social context, and that the line that distinguishes them is continually moving. Jack Price, a scientist, argues that Fukuyama appears not to take seriously the unpredictable technical and empirical hurdles that characterize the work of the biological sciences. Price also conveys frustration with Fukuyama's implication that scientists operate in philosophical and ethical vacuums, pervaded by wholly utilitarian approaches to humanity.

Indeed, while all three reviewers acknowledge that Fukuyama has catalyzed debate about the development and applications of biotechnology, each of them critiques Fukuyama for sacrificing a more nuanced view of current scientific practice for the sake of a provocative argument about its future.

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